Pensacola News Journal
for: Sunday, March 4, 2000
by: Daniel E. Mullins
Extension Horticultural Agent
Santa Rosa County

"Some Area Palms Are Hungry"

Palms are featured in many local landscapes. Though all species cannot be grown this far north in Florida, there are some that do quite well if properly established and maintained. The more cold hardy and best adapted palms for our area include: the Canary Island date, cabbage, Chinese fan, European fan, Mexican Washington, needle, pindo, saw palmetto and windmill.

There are some awfully hungry palms seen in local plantings. In general, I am afraid that they are not being fertilized properly. Palms suffer quickly and conspicuously from improper mineral nutrition. This may be due to insufficient or incorrect fertilization.

In general, palms are heavier feeders on certain nutrients than other landscape plants. Following are the most common nutritional disorders and some symptoms to watch for.

Potassium: The deficiency of this mineral is perhaps the most widespread and serious of all disorders in Florida palms. Symptoms first appear on the oldest leaves and progress upward as the condition becomes more severe. From a distance the lower leaves appear yellow or orange and upon closer inspection there may be many necrotic spots. In advanced stages, the affected leaves become withered or have a frizzled appearance.

Magnesium: This deficiency is also quite common in Florida palms. Typical symptoms are broad light yellow bands along the margin of older leaves, with the center of the leaf remaining distinctively green. In severe cases, leaflet tips may become brown.

Manganese: Also called "frizzletop," this is a common problem of palms growing in alkaline soils. Symptoms occur only on new leaves which emerge chlorotic, weak, reduced

in size, and with extensive brown streaking in the leaves. As the deficiency progresses, succeeding leaves will emerge that are completely withered, frizzled, or scorched in appearance.

Nitrogen: Deficiency of this element is easy to spot. Symptoms include an overall light green color and decreased vigor of the palm. It is easily corrected by applying a nitrogen fertilizer. Leaf color quickly darkens in response to either soil or foliar fertilization.

Diagnosis of nutrient deficiencies by visual symptoms can be difficult, even when using descriptions. Some of the symptoms overlap considerably.

Under most landscape conditions in North Florida, the nutrient needs for palms can be met by selecting a high quality "Palm Special" type fertilizer. This product will usually contain the major elements plus extra magnesium and manganese to help meet the palm tree's special requirements. Choose one that has about the same percentage of potassium as nitrogen. For the rate and placement of fertilizer follow the label instructions. Palms growing in sandy coastal locations and on fill soils benefit from 3 applications of fertilizer per year.

There are always exceptions, and here is one: Saw palmetto is a low growing native palm that generally grows in clumps. Anyone who is fortunate enough to have it growing under natural, undisturbed conditions can ignore these fertilizer recommendations for palms. Saw palmetto is quite at home here with no extra help.

Question of the Week: Pear trees are blooming all over my neighborhood. Are they flowering early and could a late freeze kill the blooms and fruit?

Answer: Pears are flowering somewhat early this year, and a hard freeze could kill some of the blooms and even baby pears. However, pears usually bear almost every year, even when late freezes occur. I am not sure how this happens. Maybe there are some late flower buds held in reserve for a second bloom following a freeze.